

Some Relevant Issues Now in Systematic Dispute

Before discussing individual options in detail, something must be said about the state of controversy existing now within the U.S. Government. It is natural for the complexity and uncertainties of choice in Vietnam to be reflected in disagreement over the prospects and merits of particular strategies. But current disagreement over realities and future prospects is not only acute (there is not even agreement, in many cases, on the relevant range of uncertainty), and fundamental; ^{it} disagreement is systematic, in the coherence of sets of opinions and of opinion-holders. It is important for the President to be aware of this distinct ²cleavage in opinion, which is highly likely to persist well into the new Administration. Its systematic nature would not emerge adequately from a discussion of options one by one.

There are, in fact, two principal, opposed ^{bodies} ~~bases~~ of opinion, each more or less reflecting the same body of current data--with its gaps, ambiguities, and contradictions--but bringing to it differences in experience, assumptions, perceptions of U.S. interests, and sense of relevance. The split in views runs through the evaluation of each option and affects perspectives on the relevant U.S. aims and alternatives as well as likely outcomes. But differences between the two groups, which will be referred to here as Group A and Group B, show up most clearly in their perceptions of current reality in Vietnam and of the prospects of the current military course.

One set of officials, Group A--comprising the highest elements in JCS, MACV, AmEmbassy Saigon, some ^ICA analysts, and most high State officials--believe:

1. Hanoi is negotiating currently from a sense of weakness and failure; its very presence in Paris is the strongest sign of this.
2. VC/NVA losses in 1968 have irreversibly weakened those forces; that plus current U.S. deployments and operations forced the withdrawal of many NVA units.
3. DRV/VC "cannot stand" the continuation of 1968 loss rates, and cannot reduce them without leaving SVN.
4. VC/NVA forces can no longer carry out an effective offensive on the scale of Tet 1968; if they try, it will fizzle, further weakening them.
5. Both RVNAF and the FVN are strengthening rapidly, so much as to discourage DRV/VC hopes of ultimate political victory ^{after US departure.} ~~if they can only~~ outlast the U.S.
6. Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES) statistics showing a new high (hamlets rated "A," "B," or "C" = 73% of population) indicate a genuinely high level and favorable trend in "population control" by the GVN.
7. U.S. operations of current scale and type will lead to conditions amounting to US/GVN victory: ^{"Victory"} meaning (throughout this paper) the destruction or withdrawal of all NVA units in SVN, the destruction, withdrawal or dissolution of all (or most) VC forces and apparatus, the permanent cessation of infiltration, and the virtually unchallenged sovereignty of a stable, non-Communist regime (essentially the current GVN: radical reforms or broadening are not regarded by Group A as essential to victory), with no significant Communist political role except on an individual, "reconciled" basis. On the time required for the VC or DRV to "crack" and given present military programs, opinions in Group A vary from almost immediately, to 18-24 months, to 3-5 years.

8. Military escalation would shorten the time needed to achieve victory though at higher costs.

Group B--including a minority at State, some CIA analysts, most of ISA and Systems Analysis in the DOD and most of the U.S. Delegation in Paris--rejects or questions all of the beliefs above. While agreeing that the VC/NVA are surely weaker and the GVN/RVNAF surely stronger to some (uncertain) extent compared to 6 months ago, and perhaps compared to a year ago, and that U.S. deployments are now more effective, Group B believes:

1. The DRV did not go to Paris from weakness or desperation. DRV motives are uncertain, but probably include a desire to undermine the GVN and GVN/US relations, and (more importantly) a judgment that it would be less costly to negotiate the US out of SVN -- in pursuit of ultimate communist victory -- than to continue fighting for another 3-7 years.
2. There is little reason to believe NVA units were "forced" from SVN, or cannot return. Reasons for the move are uncertain, perhaps related to Paris negotiations or to future operations.
3. Though 1968 losses were severe (especially in experienced leadership), DRV/VC could "stand" to replace losses at that rate, or a much higher rate, indefinitely: certainly in physical terms of manpower and infiltration capability, and almost as certainly in terms of resolution. Anyway, VC/NVA forces can control this rate of attrition, without quitting ^{the vicinity of} SVN; some 80% of combat contacts have been at their tactical initiative (i.e., they chose to ^{accept} suffer high losses in 1968).
4. Fundamental improvement in RVNAF and GVN is conjecture^d and doubtful. Increase in VC KIA by RVNAF reflects its increased size and number of operations, and still more, increased U.S. air and artillery support. "Reform" in GVN so far represents mainly replacement of Ky's supporters by Thieu's. The GVN/RVNAF could not have high confidence of defeating the VC if the U.S. were to leave within the next 2 years, even if the NVA left earlier.
5. In HES statistics, "C" hamlets must be regarded as "contested," not really "GVN-controlled." "A" and "B" hamlets comprise only 25% of rural population

(little change from January 1967). Thus, even by these indicators, 75% of rural population are still subject to considerable VC influence and presence.

6. VC/NVA could probably inflict high casualties ^{to} in US/RVNAF/GVN/civilians in large offensive, if willing to accept high (not fatal) losses themselves.

7. Victory -- as defined above -- is not soon attainable by the current military approach, certainly short of 4-5 years, and possibly (many in Group B would say probably, others almost certainly) not ever. Nor is it brought nearer by escalation.

The body of data available in Washington will support to some extent either of these positions, and is inadequate to resolve any of these issues conclusively.

In the past, high-level evaluations both in Saigon and Washington have commonly suffered from a strong optimistic bias. There are strong bureaucratic and psychological pressures toward this, and they can be assumed to be operating today (and next year); indeed, there are some familiar, unmistakable signs in current reporting and argument. But this consideration alone will not resolve all current uncertainties. Bias is not, obviously, alone on one side (though in our Vietnam experience, unhappily, it has been the optimists who have been most often most wrong). Some uncertainties (e.g., short-run trends in pacification, RVNAF and GVN improvement) might ^{could} ~~in-principle~~, be reduced by ^{disinterested} field investigation in SVN; others (e.g., VC/NVA overall capabilities and intentions, Hanoi designs, above all the impact on Hanoi of new strategies) could not.

The discussion of the situation appended to this paper elaborates on the beliefs, arguments and evidence cited above and suggests some tentative judgments

(generally along lines of Group B views). But the purpose of outlining the two positions here is to provide a context for summary evaluations of the currently relevant options. It so happens that beliefs on the matters above tend to occur, for a given individual, in the clusters which will simply be described as "Group A beliefs" or "Group B beliefs." But members of each group disagree, of course, on other relevant judgments, which leads to disagreements over preferred options. (In general, Group A tends to favor Options 1 or 2, with the aim of victory, while Group B favors Options 4 through 8, with the aim of compromise settlement, better or worse, and U.S. extrication. A few members in each group favor Option 3, with the aim of victory).